

SENIOR REVIEW AND FUNDING RECOMMENDATION
Salton Sea Financial Assistance Program – FY 2012-2013

- ✓ **Applicant:** Sonny Bono Salton Sea National Wildlife Refuge
- ✓ **Project Title:** Restoration of Red Hill Bay on the Salton Sea, California
- ✓ **County:** Imperial
- ✓ **Grant Request:** \$2,980,454
- ✓ **Total Project Cost:** \$71,080

Project Description: The project involves restoring a 650-acre area in Red Hill Bay, once used by Salton Sea fish and wildlife, by constructing a series of low berms to form 2 shallow saline water impoundments. The main purpose is to provide wading and shorebird habitat, and the secondary purpose is to reduce emissive dust that could occur if the project isn't implemented. Loafing and nesting islands, as well as snags, will be added to the area for birds. Deeper water channels, pools (approximately 6 feet deep) and culverts will provide invertebrate and fish structure. The first phase will involve establishing 2 pump systems: one to take water from the Alamo River and discharge it into the impoundments along a gravity-fed feeder ditch, and one to move Salton Sea water through a saline water delivery system to the impoundments. The first phase will also include construction of the berms on the eastern side. The second phase will involve construction of a western berm at the entrance of Red Hill Bay.

The berms will be constructed from onsite material and will be approximately 3 feet high and 15 feet wide at the top. The side slopes will be approximately 8:1 with a 63 foot base. The salinity will be between 15 and 30 ppm. The water depth will vary, with the deepest areas likely between 1 to 2 feet. The cells will have a flow-through design that empties into the Salton Sea. This project will possibly include a small sediment basin south of the Alamo River.

Summary

Criteria	Score	Factor	Total
1. Consistency with Program goals and objectives	5	7	35
2. Applicant qualifications	5	3	15
3. Project Readiness	3	3	9
4. Feasibility	4	7	28
Total Score			<u>87</u>

Consistency with Program goals and objectives:

The project objective of habitat creation/restoration is consistent with those of the program. If implemented, the proposed project will improve the conditions of wildlife using the Salton Sea by creating shallow impoundments for wading birds and shore birds in an area that once supported these birds but is currently dry. Loafing and nesting islands and snags will provide additional habitat for birds that did not currently exist. The diversity of habitats included in the description (shallow water habitat, occasional deeper areas, berms, islands, and salinity gradients) is likely to increase the potential for success. The project has significant science

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and learning potential with appropriate monitoring. The information gained from such a project could be vital for continued, larger-scale habitat restoration. It also has the capacity to explore questions about habitat use/preference that can drive future habitat design, and will further illuminate selenium contamination issues. Direct peer review is not documented; however, the concepts that drove design elements and were incorporated in monitoring and management commitments are derivative of efforts during the Salton Sea Restoration Programmatic Environmental Impact Report (PEIR) process and the State's Species Conservation Habitat project development and design process. Both of these plans underwent rigorous peer review. The proposal does include an Operations and Maintenance Plan. It was acknowledged that the science and monitoring aspects were lacking in detail in this proposal.

Applicant qualifications:

Resumes have been provided. Collectively, the applicants have experience on the habitat and operations and maintenance aspects of the project. All members of the team show extensive local biological knowledge based on years of working at and around the Salton Sea, and all have experience with creating and managing wildlife habitat at and around the Salton Sea. The team shows a strong understanding of biological concerns of Selenium. It is known that IID has in-house expertise regarding several aspects related to the water delivery/blending and excavation/dredging; however, explicit supporting documentation is lacking in the proposal package. Also lacking is supporting documentation of experience with construction at the shore of the Salton Sea.

Project Readiness:

This project is able to start within 12 months after the assumed agreement execution date. According to their schedule, they can begin the project as soon as the funding is acquired, begin construction in November of this year and complete construction by July of next year. Environmental documentation and permits are not likely to be secured within their schedule based on collective experience with permitting agencies. According to their Environmental Assessment (EA), a Categorical Exemption (CE) is filed but a CE will not satisfy CEQA requirements concerning desert pupfish, a State-listed endangered species. The CE and other appendices to their EA were not submitted with their proposal package for review. CEQA review will add some time to their schedule. The conceptual description needs to be at the engineering design level.

Feasibility:

The applicant has demonstrated the feasibility of the project but has not supported the proposal by thorough and well-presented documentation and rationale. Much of what is proposed has undergone rigorous scientific and technical review during the Salton Sea restoration PEIR process, and the development of SCH, with which the applicant is familiar, but the proposal package is lacking in scientific and technical information to support the feasibility of the proposal. The applicants have not fully examined the potential environmental impacts, notably those concerning desert pupfish, which will need further analysis in their environmental documentation and permits. The level of detail needed to address technical aspects of engineering (water blending, berm design, soil stability, etc), biological monitoring and construction methods related to the near-

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shore issues is missing. Since this is an important but relatively untested habitat development, monitoring of activities will be important and the discussion of monitoring is relatively sparse.

FUNDING RECOMMENDATION: \$1,194,154

FAP staff is committed to distributing funding to multiple projects that engage a wide range of stakeholders in restoration and research activities at the Salton Sea. Consequently, the decision was made to allocate the modest \$3m in FAP funding among the top ranking proposals in a way that would enable meaningful progress for each project. After balancing the funding of start-up phases of two other successful FAP proposals, the balance of the \$3m is directed to this project at Red Hill Bay. We are hopeful that the USFWS can leverage this funding to find matching funds from other sources to satisfy the total of this project budget.

This project will enable the USFWS to sustain important aquatic bird habitat on areas of the Salton Sea playa and within the boundaries of the Sonny Bono National Wildlife Refuge that are rapidly becoming dry due to the receding shoreline of the Sea. Significant environmental evaluation of this proposal has already been done though there may be some outstanding CEQA issues to address related to endangered species.